

Message In a Bottle Fairfield County: The underage drinking and weed capital of the country.

So claims the Urban Dictionary, a wholly subjective reference guide to which any schmuck with an Internet hookup can contribute. Alas, the authors of this entry ("Chip and Bunny") have their facts pretty much in order. Our wealthy, striving, quietly stressed-out towns are well-known substance havens, alcoholic wetlands where minors drink 20 percent more than the national average.

"In Fairfield County, substance abuse among the young has been worse than the national norm in two major ways," says John Hamilton, a drug and alcohol consumption expert who heads the social services agency Regional Network of Programs in Shelton. "One is the age of onset, particularly with drinking, which is around twelve years old. And two is the quantity of their drinking and substance abuse in general."

Nationwide, a decade of stiffening laws, chilling news reports, ominous scientific findings and energetic prevention campaigns has produced only a slight reduction in underage alcohol use. That's better than no reduction, of course. But the damage persists: Nearly 5,000 minors die annually from excessive drinking, six times the number who die from all other illicit drugs combined. Drinking remains a heavy factor in murders and suicides committed by the young, and also figures in 68 percent of drownings.

Most of alcohol's damage is less horrific, though the sheer volume is staggering: Each year 700,000 students are assaulted by other students under the influence of alcohol; 600,000 students are unintentionally injured due to drinking; and 100,000 suffer alcohol-related sexual assaults, including date rape. Underage drinkers are far more likely to have unprotected sex and to contract sexually transmitted diseases, and young women who binge drink are 63 percent likelier to become teen mothers, according to one major study. All this has a dollar cost, too: \$60 billion a year nationally, and \$621 million in Connecticut, mainly from youth violence and traffic crashes.

"Somehow it's always an uphill battle," says Kathy Niebuhr, director of Liberation Programs Greenwich Family and Youth Options. "Kids aren't going to be responsible. They're going to want to have fun." The statistics illustrate her point. In eighth grade, about one in six students has consumed alcohol in the past thirty days; by twelfth grade, half are current drinkers. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services found that fully a third of high school seniors reported binge drinking—consuming five drinks (four for girls) at a stretch—in the previous two weeks. Once the province of boys, binge drinking is now equally that of girls. The proliferation of sweet, flavored "alcopops" like Smirnoff Ice, Skyy Blue, Bacardi Breezer and Mike's Hard Lemonade—alcohol for people who don't necessarily like alcohol—may account for this distressing trend, and one other: for the first time, the drink preference of female high school seniors has recently swung from beer to distilled spirits.

There is good news though: Fairfield County's traditionally worrisome underage drinking problem, while getting no better, has stopped getting appreciably worse; more heartening still, a frightening upswing of very young drinkers seems to have tailed off in the last two or three years. Detailed student surveys in Wilton and Westport, for example, show the incidence of alcohol use by seventh, eighth and ninth graders has dropped below national norms, according to Marty Hauhuth, executive director of Positive Directions in Westport, the nonprofit prevention and treatment services group that conducted the surveys. (The survey showed a slight drinking increase among high school juniors and seniors.)

The Landscape of Addiction

Every gain, however, seems offset by a baffling slide. Newly troubling is the abuse of prescription drugs, especially the painkillers Oxycontin, Vicodin and Percocet. "Unfortunately, our youth are jumping into that trend with both feet," Captain Richard Conklin, head of the Stamford Police Department's Bureau of Criminal Investigations, says. "They have a skewed view of these pharmaceuticals, thinking they're safer because they're government regulated. But we're actually losing more people to pharmaceutical overdoses than to other drugs. They're slower acting, so they take more of them, and before they realize it, they're in deep water." (Also, they can be very dangerous when mixed with alcohol.)

John Hamilton says Oxycontin has proved the riskiest of the prescription drugs. "A lot of these kids are chewing Oxys, or 'parachuting' them—crushing up the pill and putting it in tissue paper and swallowing it. They might as well be shooting heroin. You're crushing the time-release element and flooding your system." Hamilton reports that Fairfield County owns the sad distinction of being a prescription drug-abuse trendsetter. "Now it's actually catching on around the country and becoming more of a norm," he says. "I was in Vermont a couple of weeks ago, and they're seeing more prescription drugs than ever before. It's just on their radar screen now, where we've seen it for the last five or ten years."

In 2004, after hearing Hamilton speak, Joel Dawson and Louis Hipp founded the Father's Forum in Greenwich, one of the few parent awareness groups in Fairfield County to survive beyond a year or two. "We were shocked," Dawson says. "We had no idea what was going on." Now they do, and the shock has not diminished. "Kids are finding more and more ways to get high," Dawson continues. "There are these parties, they call them 'bowling parties,' where kids bring prescription drugs out of their own homes and drop them into a bowl. Then they kind of swirl them around like M&Ms and pick out whatever they like and take them, not knowing what they are. Very scary."

"I think most adults would freak out if they had a candid talk with their kids about the availability of these drugs," Hamilton adds. Marijuana and heroin use are also rising, here and across the country. "If you talk to people who run youth treatment centers, they'll tell you that marijuana is the number one drug of choice among the kids they're seeing," says Ingrid Gillespie, director of the Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council, or LFCRAC, a collaborative dedicated to reducing substance abuse. "And they'll tell you how easy it is to get marijuana—it's getting easier to get their hands on than alcohol." According to a 2009 survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, or CASA, 23 percent of teens say they could get marijuana in an hour, and 40 percent within a day—up sharply from as recently as 2007. Students further report that cigarettes and marijuana are equally easy to buy, and that both are easier to buy than beer. Conklin notes that today's marijuana, grown chiefly in the United States and Canada with sophisticated methods, is ten to twenty times more potent than the marijuana available years ago to the parents of today's teens.

Heroin, known in days of yore as a lowly street drug, has lately attained a glamour once associated with cocaine, Conklin says. Once only 6 to 8 percent pure, heroin now is 60 to 80 percent pure, a level rendering it snortable rather than injectable. "Snorting appeals to a much wider cross-section of the populace," Conklin says. "The problem is, heroin's extremely physically addicting." Heroin use is not yet widespread among the young, but the worry is that addiction to opioid painkillers like Oxycontin forms a natural bridge to heroin use—they produce similar highs, but heroin is cheaper. (One glassine bag sells for about \$20, while one forty-milligram Oxycontin pill sells for roughly \$40 on the street—or in the school.) "Heroin and opiate addiction are only getting worse," Hamilton remarks. "A lot of kids will maintain these addictions under the radar for a long period of time."

By a long shot, however, alcohol continues to be the most commonly abused, and the deadliest, substance among the young. But why should Fairfield County be an alcohol mecca? What makes drinking so enticing here? The reasons are multilayered, beginning with the historical fact that alcohol is especially prevalent among affluent whites. (White people drink more than any other racial group in the United States.) Perhaps more to the point, Fairfield County's affluence has traditionally translated into sociability. "This town has a lot of parties," says Kathy Niebuhr, speaking of Greenwich. "And where you have a lot of parties, you have a lot of drinking." Joel Dawson too notes alcohol's role in adult social life. "A lot of people keep cases of beer or whatever in the fridge, whether it be in the garage or the basement. They buy in bulk. Guess what? The kids know it's down there, too. And nobody's counting and numbering beers, so they disappear."

Dawson was distressed to learn that not even diligent parental control could stem the flow of alcohol to their children. "Once, we had a bunch of teenagers come to a Father's Forum meeting, and I said, 'You guys are all underage. How are you getting your alcohol? Is it fake ID's?' They said, 'No, it's all the gas stations, the quicky marts. They don't care. We never go to liquor stores.'"

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Trickier to pin down is the role of stress in substance abuse. The pressures of life in Fairfield County may be

different from those in communities where people struggle to put food on the table, notes Moira Rizzo, a Darien therapist and former director of Darien Family & Youth Options. But they most certainly exist. "Our kids are told from a very young age, verbally or nonverbally, that they have to be amazing. Everyone is so competitive. The pressure to succeed, on top of all the other life pressures, is what makes Fairfield County so intense." As a result, she says, "Kids work so hard and push so hard, and then they party so hard."

In the last decade or so, psychologists and sociologists have begun studying affluent communities in much the same way that they have long studied impoverished ones. The startling finding is that affluent children show higher rates of anxiety, depression and substance use than their inner-city counterparts. Suniya S. Luthar, a leading researcher in the field based at Teachers College of Columbia University, and who has done extensive work in Westport, says these afflictions stem chiefly from two common stresses of affluent living: pressure to achieve and isolation from parents.

Parents often expect their children to succeed as they did, perhaps not realizing how unusually talented or lucky or driven they themselves are. "The American Dream basically states that if you go to an Ivy League school and get a lucrative career, you'll be happy," Luthar explains. "The fact is, some of these kids do have an inordinately high sense that their self-worth is proportionate to their success: 'I am as good as my accomplishments are.' The unfortunate corollary to that is, 'If I fail, I'm a failure as a human being.'"

Our success ethic no doubt has constructive aspects. The trouble arises when the ethic becomes overly intense and is coupled with a lack of family closeness. Fairfield County's high divorce rate and abundance of parents with high-pressure jobs may leave kids feeling that their parents are constantly unavailable to them, physically or emotionally. This isn't to imply, necessarily, that there's lots of miserable parenting going on. "It's a huge mistake to say, 'Well, these people are just entitled and selfish and out to do for themselves,'" Luthar says. "There are real challenges here. Some of these parents face very, very difficult choices in terms of balancing professional demands and parenting issues. Job sharing and flextime simply is not an option for the top executives of large companies." But for adolescents left in the breach, Luthar says, drinking and drug-taking may be attempts at self-medication.

"Affluence is more a risk factor than a protective factor," John Hamilton sums up. "That's a pretty shocking message to parents who think the opposite is true."

THE FINE LINE OF EXPERIMENTATION

Adolescents are wired for exploration, for boundary-testing, for grasping at the forbidden fruits of adulthood. Some behavioral experts claim that mild voyaging in the land of drink and drugs is a normal expression of teen curiosity. Worrisome, though, is the increasingly solid evidence that underage drinking habits tend toward recklessness. "What's different now is that kids are drinking earlier, more often, and more each time," says Kathy Steiner, a wellness teacher at Greenwich High School. "That's huge." According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, young people still drink fewer times per month than adults twenty-six and older do, but consume more drinks per occasion (five, against two or three). In other words, when the young drink, they binge. "The sense of responsibility is just not there yet," explains Lauren Iannucci, the youth coordinator for Mothers Against Drunk Driving Connecticut. "They're too young."

It is true that drinking culture has changed. Today's young are less likely than people my age (forty-eight) to step into a car with a drunk driver, since MADD and local groups made designated drivers cool. And where I received no particular message about drinking except that everybody did it, quite a lot of it, today's young are bombarded by admonitory messages. These messages, however, always seem to be fighting through a haze of vaguely approving ones—from peers, from parents, from advertising, from the culture at large. Cumulatively these messages must sound something like, "Don't drink, but we know you're going to drink anyway, so please drink responsibly, and would you check out those hotties on the beach?"

Most potent are the messages young people receive from parents. Some are patently approving, as when parents serve alcohol at their kids' parties, thinking, perhaps, that it's better to keep watch over imbibing teens than to have them drink in secret. Here and there, adults continue to host parties at which the young drink openly, despite a 2006 law that unambiguously allows police to enter private property when they suspect underage drinking is going on. In August 2009, a Wilton couple was arrested for serving alcohol to roughly forty minors, many of whom fled into the woods as police arrived. A few days later,

answering a noise complaint in Simsbury, police discovered a popular high school lacrosse coach and his wife serving alcohol to minors; the coach was soon out of a job.

But the young see alcohol everywhere, not just in illicit circumstances. Alcohol's omnipresence may itself constitute a message of approval. "Drinking has been so accepted, for everybody but kids," Kathy Niebuhr says. "Drugs, on the other hand, aren't socially accepted. Nobody's going to serve drugs out in the open. Nobody's going to serve drugs at company parties." Joel Dawson observes, "There's so much modeling going on with kids: 'How can you drink, how can you go out and party, then tell me not to do it?'" John Hamilton notes somewhat chillingly that in Fairfield County youthful use of alcohol and prescription drugs parallels that of their parents.

Moira Rizzo, the Darien therapist, says that when parents come home tipsy, their kids regard it as sort of a backhanded sanctioning of drink. "Teenagers see through hypocrisy like it's their job," she says. And CASA reports in its 2009 survey that teens who have seen their parents drunk are twice as likely as those who haven't, to get drunk themselves in a given month, and three times as likely to use marijuana or smoke cigarettes.

THE RIGHT AGE?

Adding to the concern are recent stirrings to once again lower the drinking age to eighteen. (During the Vietnam War, most states dropped the legal drinking age to eighteen or nineteen, but by 1988 all had raised it back to twenty-one.) The front man for this movement is John McCardell, a former president of Middlebury College, who, remarkably, has been joined by more than a hundred other college or university presidents in declaring the twenty-one-year-old drinking age a failure. These signers of the so-called Amethyst Initiative claim that our comparatively high legal age forces drinking underground, far from any moderating adult influence, into risky settings where bingeing and other reckless behaviors flourish. A lower drinking age would actually be safer, McCardell says, fostering a more responsible attitude toward drinking. To go with a lowered age, McCardell advocates alcohol education classes that would precede the issuance of a drinking license.

This much can be granted: People younger than twenty-one can go to war, serve on a jury, vote or sign a contract, but they can't legally order a Bud Lite. To some, the logic may seem invincible that people who are allowed to do all those adult things should also be allowed to drink. Not, however, to MADD. "There's hard data that shows the drinking age of twenty-one saves lives," says Lauren Iannucci. "Around 950 lives are saved every year." Numerous studies show that when states lowered the drinking age in the seventies, road fatalities surged, and that when they raised the drinking age again, road fatalities plunged. Raising the drinking age to twenty-one also decreased DUI arrests and self-reported drinking.

Chuck Hurley, MADD's chief executive, has called the lowered drinking age "a public health disaster" whose main effect was "more funerals." McCardell, for his part, claims that alcohol-related deaths off the roads—from accidents, alcohol poisoning and the like—are rising at an "alarming" rate among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds. There are statistics suggesting these sorts of deaths are rising gradually though not alarmingly, but it's hard to know whether the legal drinking age factors in. Also, the age demographic McCardell cites includes more legal drinkers than illegal ones, so the implications for underage drinkers remain unclear.

Proponents of a lower drinking age often mention Europe's legal ages—generally sixteen or eighteen—together with its supposedly enlightened drinking culture. In truth, European countries, led by Denmark, the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom, are having enormous difficulty with youth drinking. An ambitious study of thirty-four countries by the European School Survey Project indicated that every country but one—Turkey—had higher rates of binge drinking among fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds than the United States, and that many bingeing rates are twice as high as ours. "France, the United Kingdom, they're all working to raise their drinking ages and put in restrictions," says Lauren Iannucci.

In the United States, binge drinking increases dramatically around age eighteen, so our statistics may draw closer to Europe's as we reach late teenhood. But there is a great deal to be said for delaying the onset of drinking. Children who begin drinking before the age of fifteen are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who start drinking at twenty or older, reports the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. In addition, young drinkers are far more likely to fail in school, commit crimes and have work and relationship problems in adulthood. "It's very important to delay that first drink

as long as you can," says Marty Hauhuth of Positive Directions. "The longer you can keep them from drinking, the less likely it is that kids will develop serious long-term problems."

What's to Be Done?

If it takes a village to get the job done, as Kathy Steiner believes, then schools and communities seem to be holding the line pretty well. What needs work is parents. Moira Rizzo points to a multifaceted Darien survey of 1,700 kids about their general experiences. "What we found is that school boundaries were quite clear, but kids weren't experiencing family boundaries on the level we would like to see," she says. "It's part of that whole parents-being-friends thing, which I am not a fan of. Kids need more than that when they're faced constantly with risk and temptation."

The idea that parents need work may seem insulting to some, but it's mostly meant to suggest that parents aren't fully aware of the dangers out there—the sorts of things that shocked Joel Dawson and Louis Hipp into action. Amy Badini, a Greenwich youth liaison for LFCRAC and a mother of three kids, says, "I find that a lot of parents have their heads in the sand. Sort of like, hear no evil, see no evil. Other parents say, 'My kids are going to drink anyway. What can I do?' They feel helpless." Still other parents lament that their children will miss out on all the fun they had in high school, she says. And yet another sort of parent worries about appearing unwise. "I've had parents say to me, 'You're just stupid, because they're going to drink behind your back and you're going to look like a fool.' My reply is that I don't care if my kid thinks I look like a fool. My limit is zero."

The zero limit, it turns out, is vitally, critically important. "Kids are pushing limits all the time," Badini says. "If the limit is zero, they may push to one or two drinks. If the limit is two drinks, they may push to three or four." "Parents have to change the way they think," says Kathy Niebuhr. "They have to not say, 'Yeah, I know you're going to drink and get drunk, just try to be careful.' The message can't be gray. It has to be clear: No drinking." But isn't a shade of gray more realistic? Maybe, but it doesn't matter. "Any gray area a teenager will march right over," says Moira Rizzo.

Here is the single most important thing of all to know, confirmed by study after study: Parents are actually the most influential force in their children's lives. "Research consistently shows that in teen years, even though peer influence is big, parental influence is huge," Ingrid Gillespie says. "Most kids who don't drink or use drugs, when you ask them why, they say it's because they know where their parents stand. They know where their boundaries are." Amy Badini says that parents need to better understand the power they wield.

Kathy Steiner notes that substance abuse among today's young is more terrifying than in the past partly because it exists in a high-tech matrix in which, for example, parties can be assembled (and moved) in a matter of minutes, or some Internet adviser can explain how to parachute Oxys.

"Everything is quicker, faster, earlier. Childhood is lost," she says. Yet at Greenwich High School she has begun to see a growing cool factor emerge about partying sober. "Our perception is our reality. If you think everyone is drinking, you're much more likely to drink. But if you know that not everyone's drinking, that people do party sober, that alleviates a lot of pressure. It takes time, but we can change the culture."